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Cases and materials on the law of torts. Experimental ed., 1976

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CASES AND MATERIALS
ON THE LAW
OF TORTS
EXPERIMENTAL EDITION

PART I

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Faculty of Law
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1976

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Section 1

The Nature and Purpose of the Law of Torts

The recognition of the Law of Torts as a sufficiently singular body of law to merit identification by a rubric and segregated consideration in a legal treatise goes back only to about 1860 when an Englishman and an American published books on the subject. The word "tort", of course, was to be found both in English and French long before, and in both languages it meant "wrong". It had equivalents in Spanish and Italian and derived from the Latin "tortus", meaning "twisted" or "wrung". And, rubrics aside, the kind of problem with which this branch of the law concerns itself has been around as long as people have lived together in society, and has called for, and received, legal attention.

Wherever people live together in society the activities of some invade the interests of others and cause harm, sometimes intentionally, sometimes negligently, sometimes quite by accident. In England, let us say about the year 1066, the harm tended to be inflicted in fairly straight-forward fashion upon fairly tangible interests. People struck each other, or threatened to, spoke ill of each other, went on each other's land, and seized possession of or damaged horses and cows, pigs and sheep and various items of inanimate personal property as well. To preserve the King's Peace and prevent aggrieved individuals from relying on self=help (or going without a remedy altogether) the Norman, and especially the Angevin kings sent judges about the country to settle disputes peaceably. In other words, to apply to them a Law of Torts, nameless though it still might be.

These royal courts were not, of course, the first courts in England to deal with such problems. Indeed the history books all say that the royal courts wrested jurisdiction away from local courts, to the disgruntlement of the barons who included the issue in the Magna Carta, in the long run to no avail. But that is another story. The point of concern here is that the royal courts were the first courts developing and applying a law common to all England, thereby giving birth to the title by which the English system of law became known. Prior to the Conquest there had simply never been a central government strong enough to construct such a centralizing and homogenizing institution.

Centuries later the Common Law system spread round the world with English settlers and colonists and it continues to prevail in the Anglophone provinces of Canada, the English-speaking countries, including the United States of America, and numerous other present and former parts of the British Empire and Commonwealth. So the activity of the royal courts in post-Conquest England constituted the genesis of our Law of Torts, albeit the present generation may show scant family resemblance to its distant progenitor.

It is perhaps needless to say that the royal courts were concerned with settling disputes other than those arising out of the injuries inflicted on some by the activities of others. Those other disputes do not concern us much in this course, however, and so, our focus is almost exclusively on the injuries, the kind of conduct causing them, and what the courts have done about it all. This is a field where the law is mostly judge-made.

Down through the centuries, as society developed and grew more complex, the opportunities for harmful contact increased, and activities capable of causing harm waxed more numerous, and the interests open to be invaded became more diverse and not quite so corporeal. The Law of Torts developed more or less apace. It fell to the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, however, to do for the Law of Torts what Henry Ford did for the automobile: bring it into the big time. It generated new interests and created opportunities and instrumentalities for invading them by bringing more people into the close contact of urban life, putting them to work in factories with machines, sending them travelling on new roads and new rails, and encouraging them to compete for business in the mushrooming field of commerce. It remained for the 20th century to develop the most destructive activity yet, motoring, and to add to it, the radio, television, the aeroplane, the computer and various kinds of looking and listening devices. In the course of it all, in addition to interests in physical integrity, honour and tangible property already mentioned, the law has come to recognize as worthy of protection interests in emotional tranquility, family relations and various forms of economic and commercial relations and prospects. Neither the list of activities causing harm nor the list of interests which the law will protect is closed.

In early times, compensation to the injured individual and penalties to the Crown might figure as remedies in the same court proceedings. In other words, not only was there no well-defined Law of Torts, there was not even a clear-cut distinction between criminal and civil law. But the first treatise of the common law, published in 1187 and attributed to Ranulf de Glanvill, remarked that "some pleas are criminal, and some are civil". Lord Mansfield in Atcheson v. Everitt, (1755) 1 Cowp. 382 at 391, 98 Eng. Rep. 1147 said "Now there is no distinction better known, than the distinction between civil and criminal law; or between criminal prosecutions and civil actions." And Winfield in his treatise the Province of the Law of Tort, in 1931, indicated (p. 201) that "Tort can be distinguished from crime in that the sanction for crime is punishment, while the sanction for tort is an action for damages."

So now we can say the criminal law proscribes anti-social behaviour under penalty of fine or imprisonment. The Law of Torts concerns itself only with reparation to the individual for the harm done.

Or is it that simple? Consider the following cases.

CHAPTER III: INTENTIONAL INTERFERENCE WITH PROPERTY

Trespass to land, like the various trespasses to the person descended from the old writ of trespass, is, like they are, actionable without proof of injury. The unauthorized entry on the land is considered sufficient injury in itself. However, the possibility of strict liability for trespass to land has persisted much longer in our law than it has with respect to other forms of trespass. Nevertheless, today we can probably say that in a trespass to land action the defendant must have intended the invasion, although the question of whether strict liability could still be imposed was mooted in a Canadian case in Section 1 as recently as 1959. And a vestige of strict liability remains in the rule that once the defendant is found to be a trespasser on the plaintiff's land he is liable for any damage he does without regard to his fault.

Some of the cases in Section 1 are concerned with the nature of the interest being protected: sometimes under the guise of trespass to land the real interests being protected seem to be economic or personal. Other cases in the section are concerned with an occupier's right to turn a licensee into a trespasser by terminating his license.

The cases in Section 2 on trespass to goods and conversion, although a barely adequate introduction to a technical subject, furnish further fact situations for exploring the meaning of intent and how it differs from motive. The distinction between trespass to goods and conversion is one between minor and major interferences with chattels, and can be a difficult one to draw.

Under the rubric of nominate torts like conspiracy, intimidation, defamation and nuisance, the cases in Section 3 are concerned with protecting certain economic interests against unfair business practices. These interests, involving as they do the jobs and businesses of people, seem closer to property interests than to personal interests, although the affinity between the tort of intimidation and such personal torts as assault and intentional infliction of mental suffering seems clear.

Section 1: Trespass to Land

ENTICK v. CARRINGTON
Common Pleas. 1765. 19 State Trials 1029

LORD CAMDEN, L.C.J. ... By the laws of England every invasion of private property, be it ever so minute, is a trespass. No man can set his foot upon my ground without any licence but he is liable to an action, though the damage be nothing. ...

COOPER v. CRABTREE
Court of Appeal. 1882. 20 Ch.D. 589

JESSEL, M.R.:— ...

The Plaintiff is the owner of a cottage in a small street in *Halifax* which is let at 4*s.* a week. His sole remaining complaint is that the Defendant has put up two small poles and a piece of board for the purpose of obstructing one of the windows of the cottage. It is a new window, and the Defendant's right to obstruct it is plain enough. He wishes to obstruct it for a legitimate purpose, because his land is building land and he is afraid that the Plaintiff will acquire a right of light which may prevent his

CHAPTER IV: DEFENCES TO ACTIONS FOR INTENTIONAL INTERFERENCE WITH PERSON AND PROPERTY

A defendant who intentionally invades a plaintiff's interests may escape liability in a number of ways, some of which we have already seen. For example, in section 3 of the last chapter we saw that a defendant may intentionally interfere with a plaintiff's economic interests without incurring liability when that interference is the inevitable result of pursuing his own legitimate interests. And in the next chapter we will see other examples of defendants escaping liability for what is prima facie intentionally tortious conduct.

In this Chapter we will deal with four distinct defences: consent, self-defence and defence of others, protection of property, and legal authority.

Section 1: Consent

"The pronounced individualism of the common law is reflected in the axiom that no wrong is done to one who consents - violenti non fit injuria. The courts have traditionally taken the view that, save in exceptional cases, it is not their function to save a man from himself rather than leave him free to dispose of his own interests as he pleases." Fleming, Law of Torts, 4th ed. 1971, at p. 77 (footnote omitted).

The most interesting and important consent cases involve actions against doctors for "surgical assault" (technically battery). Such actions should be distinguished from malpractice actions, where the issue is whether the doctor has been negligent in his treatment of the patient. In the surgical assault cases the patient is not complaining about the adequacy of the treatment, but about the fact of treatment. Normally a doctor must obtain a patient's consent before in any way interferring with his person. Normally a doctor's failure to obtain consent results in a judgment against him for surgical assault.

The medical cases in this Section are concerned first with the questions of when consent is necessary and who can give it when it is necessary, and second with the question of how much the doctor has to tell the patient in order to make his consent effective. The latter question raises the further question of whether, if the doctor has not told the patient enough, the proper form of action is surgical assault or malpractice.

The last few cases in the Section are concerned with consents obtained by duress or fraud.

AMERICAN LAW INSTITUTE, RESTATEMENT OF TORTS, s. 50

§ 50. Actual and Apparent Assent.

(1) An actual assent is given by words or conduct which are intended to express a willingness to submit to the invasion and are so understood by the person invading the interest.

(2) An apparent assent is given by words or conduct which, while not intended to express a willingness to submit to the invasion, would be understood by a reasonable man to be so intended and are so understood by the person invading the interest.